

What the Heck is Going On at NASA?

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On February 1, 2010, the federal budget for Fiscal Year 2011 was released. NASA received an increase, unlike almost any other federal agency. At the same time, the budget revealed that the Constellation Program would be cancelled and that NASA would look to private sector providers for transportation of cargo, and eventually crew members, to the International Space Station. The Constellation Program had included a human return to the Moon by the year 2020, and the program plans called for a permanent surface facility capable of supporting human explorers. In the FY2011 announcement, the prescription of a lunar objective was replaced by a concept called “flexible path” that was advertised to open possibilities of other types of human missions beyond low Earth orbit.

The policy direction has polarized the U.S. space community, where the reactions have been swift and polemical. The new policy has been described both as the death knell of human space exploration and as the only hope to save human space exploration. Some members of Congress have threatened legal action based on the current law regarding appropriation of funds to NASA, which states that Constellation cannot be cancelled without prior consultation with Congress. As might be expected, some of the reaction is directly related to losses or gains of jobs in districts associated with NASA facilities. However, various statements show high emotional content, suggesting that personal belief systems have been challenged. Meanwhile, many details of the new policy are not yet clear; and some aspects seem to be shifting in response to political reaction. The final direction for NASA will not be known until the FY2011 budget has been passed by Congress and signed by the President.

I will draw upon my 28 years’ of studying, writing, and speaking on the topic of future human exploration beyond low Earth orbit to discuss the various issues at stake and the historical context for the debate. My own work has had a central theme of lunar exploration and development, but I have also come to believe that human exploration will never be more than a political sideshow until a significant economic sector can be created in space off of the Earth.

Disclaimer: The views presented will be my own and in no way reflect official policies of the NASA.